

People-To-People In Africa, by Larry Waterman (8)

In March 1961 I received orders for a temporary assignment to JONAS INGRAM DD-938, while my first ship WILLIAM C. LAWE DD-763 underwent FRAM-1 conversion in Charleston. Having just completed ASW School I was pleased to find that INGRAM had a new installation of the latest sonar, SQS-23. Since I had just married at the end of December, I was less excited to learn she was deploying in 2 weeks for a 6-month African cruise. SOLANT AMITY II was an outgrowth of the People-to-People program of the Eisenhower administration. At that time numerous African colonial entities were gaining their independence and forming their own governments, so it was a good time to make diplomacy.

Our small task group consisted of 2 destroyers, INGRAM and NEW, an LSD and an LST with an embarked Marine detachment, and an AOG for refueling the group. The task group commander was WWII submarine hero Rear Admiral Eugene Fluckey and a Destroyer Division Commander was in INGRAM. Early visits included Trinidad and the Cape Verde Islands en route to Africa. Then, when it became difficult to gain diplomatic clearance to these new nations, we detoured north for visits in the Canary Islands, Rota and Cadiz, Spain. Once the clearances came through, we steamed south visiting Gambia, Sierra Leone, and the island of Fernando Po. The events to follow occurred during our visit to Cotonou, Dahomey (which is now the nation of Benin).

Cotonou, where we anchored, did not actually have a sheltered port. A single pier jutted out from the shore into the Gulf of Guinea. Sitting about 40 feet above the ocean surface the pier had 3 good sized lighters moored alongside. In order to send personnel ashore our boats moored alongside the outboard open-decked lighter and then we scrambled across to the inboard lighter where we waited for the small crane, which had a bucket which could lift four men at a time up onto the pier. Thankfully we had good weather for our stay.

Dahomey had very recently become independent from France and had held its first national election. We were invited to send a party to the President's palace, which was a few miles inland in the legislative capital. En route we were told of the strange political arrangement of the government. Two men ran for President and the loser became the Vice President. The two men were of different tribal backgrounds having some differences in character. After the election the Vice President placed some type of a hex on the palace, the President refused to live there, and the Vice President moved in with his lovely French blond wife, and they received our party along with their government staff.

It was a very dignified reception: drinks were served, and a beautiful buffet was spread. I don't recall all that was on the buffet but the large bowl of sheep's eyes at the far end of the table was definitely memorable. After the buffet and drinks the VP kicked it up a notch and broke out in song. He made quite a hit and had a very nice voice. But when he finished, he said, "Now it's your turn. Sing something for me!" We in the party looked at each other, wondering what to do. Someone pointed to me and another Ensign and encouraged us to sing something — "Sing Anchors Aweigh"! Well I knew our adaptation as the Navy fight song but had no clue of the words to the real song. The other Ensign graduated from Harvard and didn't know either version. But we broke out in song, improvising and muttering, and not doing a whole lot in the interest of diplomacy.

Our tour around Africa continued with visits to Capetown, Durban, and Simon's Town (home of their Naval Base on the Cape of Good Hope) in South Africa, Mombasa, Kenya, two islands in the Seychelles Group. and, after striking a whale with our starboard screw, a trip north to the Protectorate of Aden for a quick inspection at their yard. We also made two stops on the island of Madagascar which was totally exotic. On their north coast we were hosted by a detachment of the French Foreign Legion who invited us to field a team for 9 holes of golf on the course they had carved out of the deep

jungle. A stop at a bar, also carved out of the jungle, was included on the return to the port. At every visit we invited touring locals and distributed books and other materials, along with hats donated by the Masury Paint Company (very popular).

I haven't mentioned a very embarrassing event in Capetown. A local official at an early visit on board suggested we field a team and give a demonstration of American (touch) football. Not knowing what we were getting into, we accepted. On the day our pick-up team traveled by bus to the local Rugby stadium, featured more recently in a film about rugby during the era of President Mandela. It must have seated at least 80,000 people. One side was nearly full of locals, at least 10,000, and we were invited to give play-by-play on the PA system. Needless to say, it was a debacle and the crowd thinned out very quickly. But that's another story!

A few countries were impossible to visit because of political and/or inter-racial strife, or their ability to even respond to diplomatic efforts toward their new governments. On the whole it was a very interesting 6 months. And what of my excitement about working with a new sonar? It turned out that our fathometer was more central to my attention. Since so few US ships had transited those areas, we were tasked to update hydrographic data wherever possible. On all of our port-to-port transits we took soundings by fathometer constantly and linked them to our navigational track. We had to replace our burned-out fathometer transducer while in Simon's Town.